

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE (CIS) THROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A REALISTIC APPROACH

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Introduction

Information is so essential that it has become part of every human being. All human beings have information need, either individual or collective. And it is information transfer and information revolution through which cultural change; socio-economic development of a nation is possible. Information is that basic need of life, which helps in the proper fulfillment of other needs such as food, shelter etc. for its survival and growth. Hence it can be rightly said that without information, survival and development of any community is not possible. Therefore it is the basic responsibility of any welfare government to provide information services to communities. But in India, this important task of providing Community Information Service (CIS) is performed by many governmental, non-governmental voluntary organizations in their own way. There is no single agency to collect, reorganize and disseminate community information in a suitable form as per the requirement of different communities. In this context, Public libraries, being the library of communities can play important role in providing effective Community Information Services. These are the only institutions entrusted with the duties of providing right information to right users at right time, there by help people to deal with daily problem solving or in improving the quality of their lives.

Community Information Service(CIS) :The Concept

Community Information (CI) is the combination of two terms i.e. Community and Information. The term “ Information” is used to identify many concepts; hence it is extremely difficult to define it precisely. Normally, information is a message, communicated by a communicator to a receiver. It is the product of human action in mind, which may be abstract or concrete. Therefore it is the raw material that is used in knowing, making decisions, taking actions, thinking and learning. **Reid** defines

information as “a process rather than as material. Data only becomes information by the act of imparting it.”¹ Information can be regarded as data, which can be transmitted between individuals, and each individual can make use of it in whatever form he/she wants. When information becomes publicly recorded, it becomes objective knowledge available to all.

Community is a body of people in the same locality or a body of people leading a common life or a group of people having common rights or a group of people having a common possession or enjoyment. **Giggey** defines community as “a group of people who have something common. This can be their age, education, religion, interest, political affiliation, activities, work, possession or a combination of two or more of these.”² Similarly **Usherwood** defines community in a comprehensive way that “any geographical community or neighborhood will be made up of a number of communities definable by race, social class, or income group, employment, leisure interest, religion and so on, each with its own informal information network that has grown up without the help of librarians or any other information advice workers.”³ Thus community in general indicates towards a group of people having common interests. However, neither they can be assumed nor they can be created to legitimate a political programme or to support a plan for action. In the context of librarianship, it is a group of people with shared meaning and shared communication.

Community Information (CI) is the information for the survival and growth of the community or it is that information which is required by the member of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them. In this context **Kempson** has rightly defined CI as “information of self-reliance and self-determination”⁴. Thus CI is that information which helps to solve their day to day problems related to survival such as health, education, housing, legal protection, sound economic development, political rights etc and also to participate in social, political, cultural, legal and economic progress of the society either individually or collectively.

The information services through which community information (CI) is provided to communities is called Community Information Service (CIS).

Need for CIS

The social system is undergoing a vast change with the development of information generation and information technology, which has clearly divided the society into two groups i.e. 'have' and 'have not'. The 'have not' group has led to the formation of a section called 'disadvantaged' and the people under this group are not in a position to help themselves. In this context, there is high need for community information service to help these people.

Lack of access to information i.e. both public and private information is one of the major drawbacks for community development. Access to information leads to deprivation from a certain standard of life. In addition, lack of access to governmental information leads to low participation in governmental processes, which hampers the developmental process of a community and nation.

Society and social system must change with time. Lack of CIS affects this changing process and creates social imbalance. In this context **Bundy** has rightly described that "Access to information does not in itself give people power over their lives but lack of access to information can render a person powerless in the sense of being unable to exercise intelligent life options"⁵. Therefore CIS is very much needed to make the people of a community informed about the changes around themselves and to improve their standard of living in all respect.

In the present information age, information is considered to be a resource, a product and thereby a need. Hence, the problem of developing countries is not merely economic poverty but also information poverty, which should be met on a priority basis. Such kind of productive, survival and developmental information is called Community Information (CI) which is crucial for socioeconomic development of a community.

CIS through Public Libraries : Why and How

CIS may have its origin in west but in India also dissemination of community information through CIS has been taking place since times immemorial. In ancient India, the CIS could be traced back to the inception of dandora, clay tablets, palm leaves and edicts of Ashoka. For instance, during royal administration, information about the local events, taxation, penal sanctions, royal policies, public policies etc were used to reach the

people through the medium of dandora and these works were carried out by an officially engaged team who would beat the drums and attract the attention of the public and then announce the message loudly. This was also a popular medium of communication of information in rural India at that time. Similarly, during Ashoka Empire, the edicts of Ashoka were clearly illustrated to disseminate it to public. Later on, these information and messages were recorded on various types of inscriptions. But all these services were made informally. In independence India, CIS started somewhat in a formal way since the inception of Gram Panchayat. In rural India, these Gramasabhas were serving as the community information center by summing up the local and other events and planning of various social, cultural and political activities.

With the advent and advances of communication and information technologies, the mass media and print media have undertaken the responsibility of performing CIS in their own way but with a wider coverage.

Gradually all these publicly recorded knowledge, starting from clay tablets, pamphlets, books and non-book materials were started to store in a place for its further use, called library. Thus since the dawn of human civilization and formation of civilized societies, the human beings are in need of community information and the libraries. Among different types, the public libraries are performing the duties of providing it either in a formal or non-formal way.

Public libraries that are entrusted with the basic duty of preserving the recorded knowledge of past and present for future use are also responsible for providing required information to the surrounding communities. Besides, in changing situation of society, public libraries are facing new challenges. On one hand there is tremendous pressure due to information explosion, development of new information technologies etc for acquiring latest information on all fields of knowledge, on the other hand there is an increasing demand for pinpointed exhaustive and accurate information in quickest possible time. Thus in the changing library environment, public libraries have no way other than to shift towards information based community oriented libraries rather than repository centers of books and other documents. Failing which, the existence of these libraries will reduced to the status of a store house of books and other printed documents.

Now the question arises, how can public libraries perform the duties of CIS. From the early time, public libraries are performing the duties of reference service, both anticipatory and responsive. Simply these services are to be restructured to provide CIS. Basically CIS has two common aspects i.e. general community information services (GCIS) which is anticipatory in nature and specific community information services (SCIS), which is responsive in nature basing upon the information need of the community. GCIS provides information common to all and help people to solve their day-to-day problems. For instance information on health, education, transport, employment, consumer problems, entertainment, housing, banking system, governmental agencies, legal information etc should be included under general CIS, which will help to increase the quality of lives. SCIS is concerned with specific target groups, such as those belonging to the lower socio-economic groups, the disadvantaged, or person with information on a specific problem. For instance a person want information on a specific problem of agriculture, or on animal husbandry or on establishment of a small scale industry or utilization of available local resources, or an a particular governmental / non-governmental agency and its activities etc. This service can be performed by various methods such as counseling, referral, practical help, advice, advocacy, community education, self-help, escort, liaisoning with different governmental and non-governmental agencies / experts etc. This service will improvements in their lives.

Conclusion

In defining the concept of library, Rubakin, the famous Russian bibliopsychologist and educator opined that “it is not just a shop where books are to be had, it is an advisor, a guide, a friend. It must go out to reader, bring him in rather than wait for him to come of his own accord”⁶. A public library, being the library of the community is intended to provide functions of an advice center and local information center for the whole community rather than only offering books and other reading materials to readers.

There are many agencies alternative to public libraries to provide CIS such as Community Resource Centers, Community Information Centers, Community Libraries etc. But these alternative centers seem to be serving a particular community information need or a particular interest group. In fact, it can be said that the inherent problem lies in

the services of traditional public libraries are responsible for the emergence of such centers.

Therefore, to keep pace with the social change, the library professionals have to consider the libraries social commitment. They should take its social responsibility seriously. Besides providing reading materials, they have to provide CISs, which should assist individual groups with daily problem solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services should be concentrated on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people usually face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights. To perform such vital functions by the public libraries, this paper *mutatis-mutandis* suggests the followings.

- a) Identification of community information needs through careful research.
- b) Collection of community information from all sources and in all forms. Therefore the established rule for obtaining and organizing these materials should be changed.
- c) The acquisition of these materials should be on the basis of local and translocal community need and should be accurate, extensive and up-to-date.
- d) The acquisition and organization of such materials should be a regular house keeping process.
- e) The organized materials should be available in shelves and in various machine-readable forms for its easy and quick retrieval.
- f) The pictures and posters should be pasted in a prominent place. There should be provisions for display of pamphlets. Moreover the community information must be organized and repackaged in a manner that will be best suited to the needs of community members.
- g) All public libraries in a state should be connected through a networking system to share their resources. Further the state network should have connectivity to different regional, national, and international library networking system.
- h) The public library should keep close link between other governmental and non-governmental agencies, experts of different fields to collect and share resources.

This will help to solve specific problems of the individual or groups of the community.

- i) Each public library should prepare directories on different aspects such as health, education, transport, telephone etc and on different agencies, along with their activities and contact points of their locality to meet the general community information needs of the community.
- j) The relationship between library personnel and users should be increased through constant interaction. In this context it is highly suggested that each libraries should carry out proper human resource planning and development process.

Therefore it is concluded that public library is the best organization to provide CIS than any other organization or agencies. However it is highly essential that once this programme is undertaken by library, the programme should be constantly reviewed and necessary changes and modification should be made to provide effective and efficient community information service (CIS).

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